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Relationships: Gift For Elizabeth, Gift For Us

BY

DR. VIE THORGREN

Introduction

In order to more fully receive and celebrate the gift of relationship revealed in Elizabeth Ann Seton's life, I invite the reader to participate in two personal exercises. Both involve reflection on personal history and the remembrance of formative moments. These reflections might serve as an "entrance rite" into the heart of Elizabeth Seton who so carefully recorded her own "Dear Remembrances."

For the first exercise, I encourage the reader to recall two loving events from his or her life. Let the first event be a time when you felt the deep love and care of another person. Let the Spirit bring the occasion to mind. Take a moment just to remember and to relish the experience.

Now, let the second event be a time when you showed deep love and caring for another. Again, let the Spirit bring the loving action to mind and then take a moment just to remember and to enjoy that experience.

This exercise is used on a regular basis by Dr. David McClelland of the Harvard Medical School with his students.¹ Before asking the medical students to recall these experiences he measures the level of secretory immunoglobulin A (s-IgA) in their saliva. This is the antibody active against viral infections such as colds and flu. Dr. McClelland again tests the saliva following the remembrances in order to demonstrate that the level of s-IgA rose significantly for each participant. He calls the change "the Mother Teresa effect" and the point he is trying to convey to the doctors, nurses and social workers is that "being loving to [others] is good for their health and it is good for your own."

I would like to suggest that this "effect" — that being loving to people is good for them and for you; healing for them and for you — was central to the life knowledge of Elizabeth Ann Seton. It is a part of our birthright as her heirs.

For the second exercise, I offer the reader the following reflection questions. Have you ever been in a context where you were asked to recall your earliest memory? If so, were you given the opportunity to reflect on that memory and its relationship to your present way of living? Did that reflection provide any insights for you in understand-

¹ Joan Borysenko, Ph.D., *A Woman's Book of Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 195.

ing the movement of grace in your own life?

Many psychologists believe that one's earliest memory and the meaning that one attaches to it reveals a foundational life perspective. Many who are trained in psycho-spiritual healing believe that this earliest memory can give one insight into God's healing activity throughout one's life and a glimpse at how God works "through one's wounds."

We do not have to wonder at Elizabeth Seton's first memory for she recorded it in her own words. Her earliest memory centered on her feelings at the death of her younger sister Catherine in 1778:

At four years of age — sitting alone on a step of a doorway looking at the clouds, while my little sister Catherine, two years old lay in her coffin — they asked me did I not cry when little Kitty was dead. No, because Kitty is gone up to heaven. I wish I could go too with Mama.²

It is evident that the loss of her mother and the ache to be with her was burned into Elizabeth's memory.

Hope Edelman, in her book *Motherless Daughters*, describes the significance of mother loss during the formative years. "Unlike the adult who experiences parent loss with a relatively intact personality, a girl who loses her mother during childhood and adolescence co-opts the loss into her emerging personality, where it then becomes a defining characteristic of her identity. From learning at an early age that close relationships can be impermanent, security ephemeral, and family capable of being redefined, the motherless daughter develops an adult insight while still a child, but has only juvenile resources to help her cope."³

The effects of this mother-loss include a number of typical behavioral patterns, the first of which is a forced cognitive and behavioral maturing beyond that of her peers. This is evident in Elizabeth through a journal portrait of herself remembered from her young years in New Rochelle.

Miss Molly Bs at 8 years of age girls taking bird eggs — I gathering up the young ones on a leaf seeing them palpitate thinking the poor little Mother hopping from bough to bough would come and bring them to life — cried because the girls would destroy them and afterwards always loved to play and walk alone — admiration of the clouds — delight to gaze at them always with the look for my Mother and little Kitty in heaven.⁴

² The manuscript of "Dear Remembrances" is in the Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg, Maryland.

³ Hope Edelman, *Motherless Daughters* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1994), xxv.

⁴ Archives, "Dear Remembrances."

She continued her reflection with a description of her private enjoyment of nature and how it always seemed to mingle with her thoughts of God and heaven. She also recorded her pleasure at this young age in learning anything pious and her delight in being with old people. The maturity beyond her years was also evident in her relationship with her father-in-law, who regularly confided in her and who even shared letters with her that he had shown to no one else.

A second behavioral pattern noticeable from mother loss is the transference of feelings, needs, and expectations onto the nearest available adult. Elizabeth developed a deep attachment to her father, Dr. Richard Bayley. Much more will be said about this relationship later.

Finally, many "motherless daughters" experience great difficulty in relationships. Some are never able to attach because they fear abandonment. Some are never able to be anything but the child or infant in any relationship that is formed.

Elizabeth Seton departs from this typical pattern. She had an extraordinary capacity for relationships and yet, if we pay close attention, we can see the effect of the wounding. Elizabeth often thought of herself as rejected by God and by loved ones. She told her friend, and sister-in-law, Cecilia Seton that she frequently walked in darkness.⁵ She was inordinately anxious during separations from loved ones. When they failed to correspond in what she considered a timely manner, she painfully assumed that it meant a loss of love. When her father lay dying she bargained for his eternity so that they would never be separated again. In exchange she suggested that God take her baby, Catherine Josephine.⁶ Near the end of her life she confided to Simon Bruté the dark secret that her conversion to Catholicism had been delayed by her fear of abandonment. Crippled by the realization that a choice would result in rejection, she remained indecisive.

What is most instructive for us in meditating on Elizabeth's life, however, is not the fact that she lost her mother, but how she met her grace in the process of mourning. I believe that three significant *gifts of relationship* were born of Elizabeth's response to grace. In describing each of these gifts I will try to show: 1) how it was empowering for her; 2) how it was empowering for others; 3) how it is relevant to our time; and 4) how it is helpful for an understanding of charity that embraces justice.

⁵ Marie Celeste, S.C., *The Intimate Friendships of Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton* (New York: Alba House, 1989), 121.

⁶ Marie Celeste, S.C., *Elizabeth Ann Seton: A Self-Portrait* (Libertyville: Franciscan Marytown Press, 1986), 17.

Elizabeth drew closer to her father as a result of her mother's death. It was both the adequacy and the lack in this relationship which fostered her spiritual maturity. She knew that she was her father's favorite and she drew on the strength of this knowledge even when she longed for more of his attention.

Part of the grounding that Dr. Bayley provided Elizabeth included his attention to factors which would provide a secure base for her life. In the year immediately following her mother's death, he drew closer to home and provided important attention and care for Elizabeth and her sisters. When the year of mourning ended, he tried to provide a mother for the girls in his marriage to Amelia Barclay. When this did not work out to the best advantage of Elizabeth and her older sister Mary, he ensured that they had a good experience of family in his brother's home. He also shared his love of nature with her and he made sure that she had a quality education. He instilled in her a set of values including his passionate concern for the suffering. Finally, he gave her a good father image. Elizabeth knew her father to be a compassionate, dedicated and selfless man. He was a role model she could admire and she was proud of his work and proud that he was her father.

Beyond what he provided directly, her father also gave her the gift of his absence — in such a way that it called her out of herself.⁷ Dr. Bayley was not absent because he was self-indulgent or out carousing. He was absent because there was something that he needed to "be about." He had a strong sense of mission and Elizabeth absorbed an awareness of a world larger than her own through her father's absence.

Even in his absence, she was often within the sphere of his activity. During the yellow fever epidemic she witnessed the arrival of hundreds of sick Irish immigrants who had been confined in the dark holds of the ship. She was aware of the little infants who died immediately unable to receive nourishment from their mother's breasts. She learned the suffering that accompanied their want of food. She also witnessed the rejoicing and prayers of gratitude when simple tents arrived. Elizabeth knew that for these people and for many who had preceded them during her growing up years, Dr. Bayley was a father.

⁷ Much has been written about Dr. Bayley's neglect of Elizabeth. This portrait of him fails to consider the historical context and normal family responses to loss and to parenting in the late eighteenth century. It also misses the fact that absence can be as important a gift as presence in the parenting process.

She knew her father was the “father of the fatherless — of the most abandoned.” It was her father’s absence that led her to God the Father.

From the beginning, Elizabeth’s father valued and applauded her maturing. In fact, their relationship was closest as she became an adult woman. He appreciated her that way, and she blossomed under his approval.

As a result of the many graces in this primary relationship, Elizabeth moved through her adult life with the authority of the “Father’s Daughter.” This was the authority that Father Dubois and Bishop Carroll recognized in her. It probably had much to do with why they trusted her.

In Jungian psychology the “Father’s Daughter” is a specific archetype, or kind of divine energy. It is available to all women, but dominant in some.⁸ A woman who carries this kind of spiritual energy as the dominant archetype in her personality is known for her winning strategies and practical solutions. She typically keeps her head in emotional situations and develops good tactics in the midst of conflict. She seeks and enjoys the company of men and naturally gravitates toward powerful and heroic men. She can be a companion, colleague, or confidante of men without developing erotic entanglements. She recognizes the value in tradition and respects authority. At the same time, she is adaptable to changing circumstances and able to recognize new applications of old ways. Highly relational, she inspires the trust of others, particularly those in authority. Capable of forceful and convincing dissent, she will always protect the open wound of her opponent.⁹

As Jesus spoke with authority because he knew the Father and was the Beloved of the Father, Elizabeth Seton moved with the same kind of authority. She knew the Father and was the Father’s daughter. The words of Jesus in John 16:15, “I no longer call you servants...I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father,” could also be ascribed to Elizabeth. She led

⁸ There are numerous feminine archetypes. Toni Wolff, “Archetypes of the Feminine,” gathers them together under four main types: the Mother, the Warrior Woman (Amazon), the Father’s Daughter (Heteira), and the Wise Woman (Medium). Every woman has access to all of the “energies,” but one will dominate in her personality and will be easily recognizable to those who know her. The description of the Father’s Daughter which follows reads almost like a single paragraph summary of Elizabeth’s personality. Besides Toni Wolff’s work, see also Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman*, for further information on the feminine archetypes.

⁹ The archetype of the Father’s Daughter is that of a mature capable woman. It should not be confused with “daddy’s little girl,” which is an entirely different kind of energy. The one exercises authority in the world and is very much “about her Father’s business.” The other is self-absorbed and seeks only to be admired.

with this kind of freedom. She invited others to know themselves in this way also.¹⁰

As a result, Elizabeth instinctively knew that legitimate authority exists in *relationship*, and that apart from relationship a person could exercise control, but not true authority. In her understanding, authority offered freedom. Control was self-serving or abusive and therefore rightfully confronted.

This capacity to distinguish between authority and control guided Elizabeth at significant moments in her life. She recognized the authority of Father Babade, Bishop Carroll and Father Simon Bruté. They were relational. When Henry Hobart, an important influence in her life, stepped out of relationship and tried to control her, his influence diminished. In her struggle with Father DuBourg concerning the sisters' desire to continue to have Father Babade as a confessor, she recognized control. In her struggles with Father David she also recognized an absence of relationship.

We live in a time when women's issues and new questions about authority are very much in the forefront of our consciousness. Elizabeth's understanding of relationship as essential to the legitimate exercise of authority has contemporary relevance. The spiritual energy of the "Father's Daughter," which has been integrated into the charity charism, can bring both a creative perspective and a respectful voice to the many issues that confront us.¹¹ A challenge for our commitment to justice work is to reflect on this important aspect of our heritage for the insights and the strategies it can offer us today.

THE SECOND GIFT — Midwifing the Laboring Spirit

Elizabeth Seton's life was a constant journey in the shadow of death. One of her greatest graces was the ability to befriend death. She

¹⁰ The fact that Elizabeth Seton carried the energy and authority of the Father's Daughter, and related to God as Father, does not imply that this is the only feminine authority style or always the most appropriate style to every circumstance. It is one of several, each having its own strengths and weaknesses. The Warrior Woman, for example, carries prophetic authority. She can, however, be abrasive and traditional authority will be so threatened by her voice that the opportunity for conversion of those in authority is often lost. The Father's Daughter, because she is so trusted and because she will "cover the wound" of her opponent even in battle, has great influence with traditional authority. She needs a strong sense of herself, however, or she may simply become a mouthpiece for the status quo.

¹¹ It is interesting that the dominant archetype in Saint Louise de Marillac was also the Father's Daughter. The spiritual energy of this archetype seems to be synonymous with the Daughters and the Sisters of Charity. Vincent de Paul, in his conferences to the first sisters, told them that they were "Daughters of God," "Beloved of the Father" — "as dear to Him as the apple of His eye." See in particular Conferences 2 and 24.

not only was not afraid of death, but she began to see the dying process itself as a laboring into a fuller life.

Her mother died giving birth. As she matured, she drew wisdom from this. The time in which Elizabeth accompanied her loved ones in their death labors became a "blessed time." Her wisdom about death and her gift for accompanying the dying was recognized by relatives in need. The family members who had rejected her after her conversion sought her presence when it was time to die. Those who had previously feared "contamination" from her Catholic ideas sought her ministries when a member of the family faced eternity.

One of the reasons Elizabeth loved the Catholic Church was the real comfort the sacramental presence offered to the dying. She was saddened that her relatives lacked this comfort. She therefore tried to accompany them in the best way possible. To her estranged stepmother, Amelia Barclay, she gave the final "sacrament" of her forgiveness and reconciliation. Her stepmother died in peace.

Her ability to accompany the dying is also a part of the legacy that she has left to us. We live in a death denying culture which sanitizes death — avoids it — and, when forced to acknowledge it, wants to speed up its process. There is no sense of dying as a "blessed time."

We fail to recognize that the extent to which we devalue dying, we also devalue living. When we fail to acknowledge the surrendering back of what has been received, we become imprisoned by our lack of awareness. It is no coincidence that the same culture that fears death is also a disposable culture. We are buried in trash and toxic waste, and still we continue to deny it.

Acknowledged or not, there is a whole lot of dying going on as we approach the new millennium. Institutions that we thought were enduring are passing away. The rapid changes in health care, religious life, and corporate entities are just a few examples. Common assumptions about a way of life that involved a lifelong career with a single company have given way to upheaval and insecurity.

Our culture needs people who are not afraid of death; people who can be midwives to the dying of old ways and the birthing of new and more just ways of living. Institutions and individuals need the charisma of the labor coach who understands the paschal mystery and knows that death is a passageway to life. As we follow the example of Elizabeth Seton, the charity of Christ urges us to discover the "blessed time" in the dying, that we may be faithful companions to the laboring of the Spirit in our own time.



Saint Joseph's House (The White House), built 1810.
National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emmitsburg, Maryland

THE THIRD GIFT — *Real Presence*

Elizabeth Seton was faced with a profound question at a very tender age. What is enduring? It was a question she must have probed repeatedly as she lost those dearest to her. The answer she discovered was Relationship. In fact, this was her definition of heaven. Eternity was about entry into Relationship where there would never again be separation. She felt a deep urgency that those she loved would be there with her.

Due to the early separation from her mother, Elizabeth had an acute sensitivity to physical barriers that separate. The earliest memory she recorded was one of looking at the clouds thinking of Mother and little Kitty on the other side. Heaven was on the other side of the clouds. She later wrote a touching reference to a movement beyond separation in her meditation *On Heaven*:

We shall Love! Now He escapes from our eyes while he lives in our heart — as a poor blind man speaks to his best and dearest friend but cannot see him, or *a little child to its mother through a lattice or partition* so we are to our Jesus....¹²

¹² This meditation in Elizabeth Seton's handwriting is in the Sisters of Charity Archives at Seton Hill, Greensburg, Pennsylvania. The italics are my emphasis.

We might wonder about the day her mother died giving birth. Is it possible that Elizabeth heard everything through a wall, not able to run to her mother, to see her or to hold her? It would seem likely, and perhaps explains her lifelong sensitivity to physical barriers.

When she first entered the Lazaretto with her dear William, she noted the particular cruelty of their separation from others. Gradually, however, she noticed that God caused the walls to disappear as she wrote in her journal to Rebecca, "With God as our portion, there is no prison in high walls and bolts..."

Living in the White House, her attention was particularly struck by the Presence just on the other side of the partition. She wrote to Antonio of this awareness staying with her as she went to sleep at night and as she woke in the morning.

Alas! the partitions of this world — yet I sit or stand opposite His tabernacle all day and keep the heart to it as the needle to the pole — and at night still more, even to folly since I have little right to be so near to Him. Even the hard speeches I make our Sisters and young ones do not cloud His dear countenance so indulgent He is.¹³

For Elizabeth, there were three realities without barriers. The first was communion in which Jesus was really present and available without any barrier. "Now with more than a mother's love, my Jesus, you bid me come and be fed and nourished even with your own sacred flesh."¹⁴

The second reality without barriers was "...in heaven! TORRENTS OF LOVE!!! Oceans of love to plunge in for Eternity, every faculty of our soul dilated!!! Heavenly, pure, supernatural love Undivided — God alone."¹⁵

Elizabeth's awareness of the third reality grew over time. As her spirituality matured, she began to realize the communion — the lack of barriers — in Friendship. When she returned from Leghorn she told Cecilia Seton that she never prayed "for *me* anymore, but always for *us*." Sometime later she wrote Antonio, "I never think of myself that I don't think of you." Her relationships deepened and endured despite absence and distance. These ceased to be barriers. Her friend, Julia Scott, came to Emmitsburg only once and the stay was brief, yet the sense of communion in the relationship only deepened over time.

¹³ *Books of Instruction I, Part 2*, 209.

¹⁴ *Books of Instruction I, Part 1*, 1-2.

¹⁵ From Elizabeth's "On Heaven" meditation.

One way of describing the call of charity as Elizabeth Seton has modeled it for us is the call to REAL PRESENCE. One way of describing the charism she has given us is *to be* this REAL PRESENCE — this unity in the world. Our time is hungry for relatedness, for communion, for solidarity — for REAL PRESENCE.

This gift also has implications for justice work. While we often speak of our responsibility to live in solidarity with the suffering and the poor, Elizabeth Seton's life reminds us that we must also be a REAL PRESENCE to the privileged and the powerful. As Jesus was present to Zaccheus, and in fact called Zaccheus to be present to others so that the barriers fell away, we are to be this REAL PRESENCE so that the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless can find each other.

This is distinctive of the charism of charity as it is expressed in the Vincentian-Setonian Family. Where others may be called to an alignment with the poor alone, those who follow the spirit of Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and Elizabeth Seton are called to be *Bridge* people. Our legacy is an undivided PRESENCE. Our work for justice is characterized by a willingness *to be the Bridge* so that those who are rich and those who are poor can meet each other as brothers and sisters. This is our way to holiness. In the words of Elizabeth Ann Seton, "Blessed Vocation — blessed they who understand."¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid.